

# Droid Trouble

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For years, Tereb Ab'Lon had carefully planned and manipulated his rise to power, swearing to one day hold the title of Imperial Senator. That dream was shattered the day the Emperor dissolved the Imperial Senate.

As Ab'Lon looked about the Bothan Embassy, his gaze finally resting on his immediate superior, the Bothan Ambassador to the Empire, Gattrar Shey'Tyan, the taste of rebellion whet his appetite. He watched as the ambassador helplessly submitted the Bothan people to the rule of a dictator, yet a slight smile managed to touch his fanged maw.

The Empire would not, could not, last forever. With a little luck and a lot of planning, he hoped to help bring about an early demise and secure himself a position in the government that would rise from its ashes. A position with real power, where his name would be known to all, and the destinies of entire worlds would rest on his decisions.

The council room had all but emptied when Ab'Lon's attention returned to matters at hand. As the aide to the Bothan Ambassador, his tasks included keeping an eye on opponents' strategies and political tactics aimed at discrediting Shey'Tyan and his position. A task Ab'Lon thoroughly despised, as he constantly attempted to cause Shey'Tyan's fall to assume his position, thus increasing his own power.

But no longer, he thought to himself. After Ab'Lon secretly joined the Rebellion, Shey'Tyan's fall from power meant nothing. His goal was now the total collapse of the Empire. A goal that was to begin with the Imperial Navy operation plans he silently dropped into his astromech droid's memory banks two days ago.

Shey'Tyan started toward him, his regal attire flowing behind as he moved. Ab'Lon watched him approach and tried to hide the satisfaction he felt in himself. Tomorrow he would meet with a Rebel agent and turn the plans over to the Alliance, the first step in his eventual rise to power. But today, modesty and humility in the face of his superior were the key to ensuring tomorrow's successes.

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Blaster bolts exploded outside the cockpit of the stolen Bothawui shuttle. Ab'Lon pulled it into a tight barrel roll and readjusted the trajectory to match his escape course.

"Get those hyperspace coordinates set," Ab'Lon growled as he completed the maneuver. "I'm a diplomat, I can't dodge trained TIE pilots forever." The faint cries of his astromech droid, followed by the usual fweep, echoed through the cockpit.

Another volley of blaster fire erupted about the craft as Ab'Lon dropped it into an extreme dive. The fur around his neck rippled in panic as he stared helplessly at the deflector shield display indicating failure. The momentum from the dive had pushed him down into the pilot's seat, restricting his movement until the lagging drive compensators kicked in.

He knew that an *Ambassador*-class shuttle was not designed to take this kind of punishment. Of course, he wasn't trained to battle a line of TIEs and a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer either. With a little luck, they might both pull out unscathed.

Ab'Lon glanced at the sensor display quickly. The Star Destroyer was cresting Bothawui Proper, but it had yet to break orbit and pursue. Why should it, Ab'Lon thought to himself -- without a gunner he couldn't put up a fight. The patrolling TIEs were more than enough to blow him out of the sky.

The TIEs released another barrage that rocked the shuttle. Ab'Lon tried to pull out of the dive into a hard port double turn. Blue lightning played off the control panels as several direct hits took out the shields and ionized the controls all at once. He lost control and began to spin, colliding with one of his pursuers.

The rear-end collision left both ships with minor damage, but even as the TIE spun away, Ab'Lon could feel the shuttle slowing. A quick scan of the drive display, which was just now coming back online, revealed the problem. One of the coolant lines to the main sublight drive had been severed, causing an automatic drive shutdown.

Ab'Lon's pointed ears dropped and his fur rippled in a quick wave down his neck. "Is the hyperdrive down as well?" he called as he hurriedly scanned the control displays for anything that might help him out of this situation.

After a short pause, a decisively negative series of warbles, clicks, and whistles -- followed by a fweep -- came from the droid at the nav computer console over his left shoulder.

Quickly, Ab'Lon checked the sensors. The TIEs had banked around and were coming up fast, but the Star Destroyer had only just begun to pursue. The shuttle was still a good 30 seconds out of tractor beam range.

"Unidentified shuttle, this is the Star Destroyer *Temerit*," the voice blistered with pride as it flowed through the comm. "You are ordered to surrender immediately." There was no mistaking the unspoken intent behind those cold, mechanical words should he try anything else.

"Are the coordinates set yet?" he called out expectantly. The shuttle might be dead in space, he thought, but the hyperdrive was still functional. If he could just make the jump to hyperspace before the *Temerit* could lock its tractor beam...

An affirmative whistle, followed by a fweep, was precisely what he had been waiting for. A slight smile touched his lips. "Hold on," he called back to the little droid. "I'm going to make the jump."

The warbles of protest, followed by a low moan and a series of panicked fweeps, went completely unheeded. Ab'Lon made the ancient Bothan gesture of good hope, and pulled the hyperdrive lever.

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Nim Bola made a left out of the Mos Eisley Cantina and walked past the small crowd gathered outside. He could see a Barabel's head standing a half-meter above the rest of the group and knew that his Rodian partner had to be nearby. There was no doubt that they were going to covertly attempt to follow Bola, but there was no reason to let them know. He casually moved past the community junkpile and started for his office.

In one graceful movement, Bola pushed a wind-blown golden lock of hair out of his face and switched on the small comlink attached to his collar. "You were right," he whispered into the comlink, "it's a double-cross." He casually waved away a couple of Jawas from a nearby droid lot. "I'll take them through the alley opposite the hotel's west side," he whispered, glancing over his shoulder and picking up speed. "Be ready for them there."

He pulled his timeworn gray jacket tight as the chilling night breeze kicked up. "Cold, dark, and deserted," he muttered to himself as his strides steadily increased. "Perfect time for an ambush, especially when you're not the one being ambushed." A smile touched his lips as he started to jog for the alley, taking a quick glance behind. At that moment, the two bounty hunters broke into a dead run, straight toward him. *C'mon*, he thought to himself, *come and get me*.



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The familiar starlines flowed into the mottled sky of hyperspace and a slight smile crossed Ab'Lon's features, an expression that more resembled a snarl than a smile.

"Fweep, calculate and set coordinates to make a second jump from the Piroket to the Tao-Grant system," he said, the relief of escape filling his lungs with every breath. "There's an established Alliance cell on the second moon of the system's lone gas giant." Ab'Lon glanced around the cockpit of the stolen shuttle and frowned, the fur about his face stood on end and his nose twitched nervously. "I don't want the Empire to be able to track us," he said thoughtfully. In his 12 years in politics, he had seen far too many Bothan leaders relax their guard and make mistakes, only to lose their position and often their lives. "Set coordinates for two short jumps after Piroket, away from Tao-Grant, then a third to it."

An affirmative whistle and a fweep flowed through the cockpit. Ab'Lon couldn't help but allow a hearty smile, a fearful fanged expression that seemed better suited to convey horror than happiness. The little Artoo unit, nicknamed Artoo-ZeeOne, known also as Fweep, didn't even realize he made the noise. Six Imperial technicians and innumerable Bothan droid repair techs had tried, unsuccessfully, to repair that malfunction. The task was finally abandoned and the "fweep" sound listed as a design flaw.

Ab'Lon had acquired the little droid just before it was to be shipped off and dismantled. As a Bothan, he could see the obvious advantages of having a

personal droid that almost everyone found annoying, especially the Empire, with its prim and proper devotion to perfection. Later he discovered the droid to be persistently loyal and remarkably easy to keep track of.

Fweep proved to be invaluable after Ab'Lon secretly joined the Rebel Alliance. His position as top aide to the Bothan Ambassador to the Empire had given him access to certain Imperial Intelligence files that he could quietly drop into the little droid's memory system, securing it for later transmissions.

For nearly two years he'd been sending useful information to the Rebels, but nothing more. Often he'd skip over the more vital operations he'd seen -- the fear of being caught in a situation that might cost him his office and his life was more powerful than his loyalty to the Alliance. Then three days ago, he got a glance at an Imperial Navy operations schedule.

At last, Ab'Lon had a chance to supply the Alliance with a vital bit of information, but it was risky at best. This type of information always had safeguards and alarms to keep anyone from doing what he was attempting, and his skills at bypassing security codes weren't nearly as good as his ability to dodge TIE fighters. Still, it was an opportunity he couldn't let pass.

At least that was his mindset until this morning, when a Star Destroyer escorting an Imperial dungeon ship arrived in orbit. Both craft immediately began landing drop ships and shuttles and launching patrol ships. In a matter of minutes the Empire controlled Lktim, one of Bothawui's largest cities. Determined not to be taken captive, Ab'Lon set his planned and practiced escape into motion. That's when he ran into the patrolling TIE fighters.

Looking back on it, he wondered if it wasn't paranoia and poor timing that got him into this situation. After all, he thought, there had been political prisoners awaiting transport on the planet. Anyway, Fweep still carried the plans and although the rendezvous was forgotten, he could still complete the mission by hand-delivering the plans. He wondered how he'd be received by the Alliance.

A faint gurgling noise, followed by a series of beeps and whistles, ending with a fweep, brought Ab'Lon back to reality. "Hold on," he growled as he unlatched the restraints and pulled himself out of the seat. "I'm on my way."

He passed through the cockpit door into the lavishly decorated recreational chamber, and turned toward the maintenance area. Fweep had somehow managed to work his way into the lower level maintenance hatch and was already assessing the damage when Ab'Lon arrived.

"How bad is it?" he asked tentatively, poking his head into the open hatch. A nauseating blue-black vapor worked its way into his nose, causing him to jerk his head back in a half growl, half cough.

Fweep gurgled, beeped, and whistled for an annoyingly long time before his final fweep. Though Ab'Lon couldn't follow much of the technical jargon, the basic problem was clear. The sublight drive was damaged beyond their ability to repair, and some of the command pathways between the hyperdrive system and the nav computer had been damaged during the battle.

"So basically what you're saying," Ab'Lon started, the fur along his neck standing on end, "is that we might not be going to Piroket. And to make things worse, if we get there we're not going to have a sublight drive to maneuver."

The droid beeped affirmatively, followed by a low fweep. Silence hung in the air as Ab'Lon sat, staring at the mess of wires, pipes, and cylinders, looking for any way out of this deplorable situation. He silently cursed the Empire and their TIE pilots.

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A low moan, followed by a fweep, ended Ab'Lon's last hope of repairing the drive system. They had worked for nearly three hours on craft schematics and experimental hyperdrive logs looking for any conceivable method of jury-rigging the system and bringing the sublight drive back online. They could do it, but not without overloading the drive generator, dismantling the hyperdrive, and getting outside the craft. All of which meant the task was hopeless.

Even if he could get the drive system on line, where could he stop off for repairs in a stolen *Ambassador*-class shuttle? The Empire would surely have scouts searching for him throughout the galaxy by now; the Rebel base on Tao-Grant was his only hope.

Ab'Lon's pointed ears began to twitch and the fur along the back of his neck rippled erratically. With a snarl and a low rumbling from deep in his throat, he began to pace. Fweep watched him quietly pacing into the recreational chamber and back to the maintenance hatch, the little droid's silver and gray dome swiveling with his master's every move.

The nav computer signaled 10 minutes to the Piroket system. Silently, trying to suppress his frustration and building rage, Ab'Lon helped the squabbling droid out of the maintenance hatch. He led Fweep over to the nav computer console and wedged him between it and two seats. The droid warbled, moaned, and fweepled, but Ab'Lon didn't seem to be paying much attention. He tapped the nav computer display switch several times before it went on-line.

"I don't know what we're going to do," he finally growled. "Let's just hope that we're going to Piroket," he said as he checked over the nav computer displays. Much of the control grid had blacked out since their initial jump and he had no way to calculate any coordinates other than those Fweep had entered.

"Three minutes to disengage," he said, more to himself than to Fweep, as he moved toward the pilot's seat. He stopped in mid-stride and looked back to the little droid. "Could you get us to Tao-Grant if we disengage the nav computer?" he asked doubtfully.

After about 30 seconds of silence, the little droid responded with a series of whistles that Ab'Lon could only translate as "maybe." "It's worth a try," he said as he sat down and reached for the safety harness. "As soon as we..."

Ab'Lon was slammed into the forward control panels as the shuttle jerked out of hyperspace. The sounds of smashing equipment and cracking bones filled the cockpit. He was dumped to the floor in a semiconscious, broken mass.

Fweep let out a series of shrill cries, followed by a low moan and a short string of fweeps. Ab'Lon barely heard the little droid as he struggled to regain his feet, dimly aware of a severe pain in his chest and blood trickling into his eyes from his forehead. He slowly glanced out the cockpit to determine what the little droid was in such a fluster about. There, eclipsing the void of space, sat a planet.

His violet eyes widened and a cold chill ran up his spine, rippling the fur all the way up to his twitching pointed ears. The fog that clouded his mind quickly cleared and he leaped back into the pilot's seat, reaching for the damaged controls and ignoring the protests of his battered body.

Instinctively, he tried to pull the craft into an extreme climb. Then he remembered that the sublight drive was out. The craft rocked violently -- nearly throwing Ab'Lon to the floor of the cockpit again -- as it entered the planet's gravity well. Frantically, he reached for the maneuvering thruster controls, firing them in attempt to break free. There was no change in course as the shuttle hit the upper atmosphere, tossing the battered Bothan toward the back of the cockpit.

"Hang on," he cried as he tried to make his way back to the pilot's seat. "I think we're going to crash."

The shuttle streaked downward and Ab'Lon did his best to keep it from being scattered across this planet's desert terrain. "Are you all right back there?" he yelled over the shrieking alarms and flaring warning lights. The racket filled the cockpit and annoyed Ab'Lon.

The electronic snort followed by a low fweep successfully conveyed the little droid's impression of Ab'Lon's piloting skills. He was half-tempted to release the droid's safety restraints and let him bounce around the cockpit for a while, but the ground was approaching fast. Besides, he decided, Fweep could probably magnetically anchor himself in place. A trick he wished he could use to keep himself in the seat of this shuttle. He'd been thrown to the cockpit floor once too often -- the pain in his chest still stabbed like a vibroblade.

He fired the maneuvering thrusters again, hoping to bring the nose of the shuttle up and keep the impact from killing him. He made the gesture of good hope, realizing that several fingers on his right hand were broken when they wouldn't extend to the proper angles. As he braced for impact, he once more cursed the Empire for putting him into this situation.

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The speeder raced across the desert terrain of the Dune Sea. Nim Bola, a man who never much cared for the company of Rodians, decided that this one smelled worse in the sun than in the dark confines of the cantina. The thought of returning to the rank atmosphere of the Pit of Carkoon didn't exactly make matters better, but there weren't many solitary places to permanently dispose of incriminating evidence. The Sarlacc was both.

Bola glanced at the two figures, piled one on top of the other in the speeder's only passenger seat, and a smile touched his worry-lined features. The ambush couldn't have gone any better. He'd lured them into the alley and Tavri dropped the Rodian with a single shot before the enemy could draw his weapon. The Barabel, on the other hand, took two blind shots at Tavri and turned to track Bola before three shots from the others' sporting blaster and two from Tavri's heavy blaster dropped him to the ground. The perfect payment for revenge.

They'd hired him to track an Ithorian who had been frequenting the cantina lately. The pay was too good and the job too easy. Looking back on it, he decided that it may have been a good idea to warn them of the Ithorian's pet meat eating plant, but then again, surprise is the spice of life.

Bola brought the speeder to a halt a good 15 meters above the pit, well out of range of those damned tentacles. He glanced down at the waiting pink maw, the odor about the thing made the Rodian smell good.

"Well," he said as he lifted the lighter of the two and dropped him over the edge of the speeder, "I hope you taste better than you smell." As he watched the Rodian roll down the pit into the Sarlacc's throat, he wondered just briefly what happened to its victims. Sure he'd heard rumors, but none had been conclusively proven. He shook the thought away, swearing to never find out firsthand.

The whistling sound of something headed toward him at high speed brought Bola back to reality. He gazed skyward, but whatever it was, was hidden in the light of the second sun. He hefted the Barabel over the edge of the speeder and dropped him into the pit. The heavier Barabel sank into the sand, but a thick tentacle shot from the Sarlacc's throat and quickly dragged him past the rings of fangs filling the maw, into the blackness beyond.

Bola balanced himself and looked skyward for a glance at the craft that was bearing down on him so quickly.

A sudden rush of air rocked the speeder as the craft hurled by, not more than 20 meters overhead. Bola was thrown out of the speeder. He reached out with his left hand and grabbed for the foot step. He caught himself and glanced down. Fear gripped him as he dangled over the Sarlacc by one arm. He pulled himself back into the craft.

He sat down, breathing heavy and shaken. For the next few moments, he tried to ease his breathing and lose the thought of falling into that disgusting pit of death. Silently, he swore he'd never get this close to that monstrosity again.

It wasn't until he heard the explosion that Bola realized the craft that buzzed him wasn't someone deliberately trying to kill him, or kids from Anchorhead messing around. He turned the speeder toward the smoke rising over the dunes and hit the accelerator, hoping that this wasn't another mistake.

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The shuttle slammed into a sand dune, tearing the bulk of the lower starboard wing off, and thrusting Ab'Lon into unconsciousness for the duration of the crash. When he'd finally regained some of his senses, he could dimly hear a low moan, followed by a fweep from somewhere behind, accompanied by the soft crackling of electricity all around. An odd sense of vertigo made his fog enshrouded head spin, and he coughed violently as thick black smoke filled his lungs.

It wasn't until he opened his eyes that Ab'Lon realized the shuttle was lying on its side -- what was left of it anyway. The restraints pushed against his broken ribs and with every breath a new sensation of pain rippled through his battered body. Everything hurt.

He tried to release the restraints with the broken fingers of his right hand, while getting a firm grip on what was left of the weapons console with his left.

After about 30 seconds of fidgeting with the latch, it popped free. His grip on the console was instantly broken and he hit the starboard wall -- now the bottom of the cockpit -- with a thud. It took him a few minutes to get to his feet. He crumpled back to the floor several times in pain as he tried. He had a very difficult time breathing and his right arm had gone completely numb after the fall.

Several rays of daylight slipped through cracks in the hull, furnishing just enough light to assess the damage. Fweep was still strapped in, but one of the cockpit chairs had been dislodged and was lying on the floor in a mess of debris. The battered and dented little droid seemed to be on the verge of falling. He released a series of shrill fweps as various electrical wires surged near his swiveling dome. Very little of the cockpit had escaped damage and there was no way Ab'Lon could get the little droid down without some assistance. He scanned the area for anything that might help.

The entry ramp was lying partially open and he decided that it might be his best chance. Slowly, he worked his way through the wreckage toward the sunlight streaming in. Part of him hoped and part of him feared that maybe someone saw the crash who might help him.

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The wreckage was scattered across a 300-meter radius, but somehow the bulk of the craft remained in one piece. It was of alien design, but resembled an *Ambassador*-class shuttle Bola once saw while investigating a case on Coruscant a few years ago.

He drew his heavy blaster pistol from its holster and, working his way through searing shrapnel, moved toward the cracked-open entry ramp. He half expected a stormtrooper or two to leap out, but the sheer devastation of the ship quickly put those fears to rest. He was six meters away when something stumbled out of the shuttle and fell face first into the sand.

Bola edged up closer, half expecting a double-cross, but that was his nature and it was a difficult feeling to ignore, even in these circumstances. The back of the creature's royal blue and gold vest was torn and scorched. Its back heaved, obviously gasping for air. Furry, taloned fingers clawed slowly, uselessly at the sand. The fur along the back of its neck stood on end, occasionally rippling in the hot desert breeze.

Placing his left boot under the creature's right shoulder, Bola cautiously turned it over. A low groan escaped its lips and its chest heaved in a series of choking coughs. The mottled, singed fur of the creature's face partially covered some nasty wounds. Its clothing was torn and hanging, revealing a disfigured, badly battered chest. A single piece of jewelry hung around its neck -- a silver pendant. It was partially blackened, but the workmanship was exquisite. Bola shuddered -- he wasn't even sure if a bacta tank could save this creature from death.

Slowly, the creature's eyes moved, at first fluttering, then finally opening. Bola peered down into the creature's wide, violet eyes, looking for any sign of life.

"You," the creature visibly gulped, starting the thought over. "You must help me... R2," it muttered between breaths. "Get the R2 unit," it sighed heavily, nearly losing consciousness.

"What R2 unit?" Bola asked, vaguely wondering how hard the creature had hit its head.

"In the..." it started, but was interrupted by an abrupt wail of clicks, whistles, and moans. Bola moved cautiously into the mangled craft, leaving the battered creature muttering something to itself. He climbed over the twisted metal of the cockpit, glancing at a growing fire in the hold, before peering in.

He wondered how anything could have survived the devastation that surrounded him. A quiet moan, followed by a fweep, surprised Bola and he turned, training his blaster on the noise. There, clinging to the cockpit floor, which now stood vertically, was an R2 unit. It was partially strapped to a swivel chair and wedged against a damaged computer console. Bola tried to stifle a smile, but the scene was just too comical.

"C'mon," Bola said with a hearty smile, "let me help you down from there."

The droid moaned and fweped throughout the process -- a process which taxed Bola's patience to the point where he was tempted to shut down the annoying little droid and leave it there. But after about five minutes it was quietly working its way out of the craft. Bola moved to the creature, still lying on its back in the sand, and felt for a pulse.

It opened its eyes and gazed up at him. "Take the droid," it started slowly, "to the Alliance." Its hand grasped Bola's shirt, and it pleaded, "Please."

Bola looked directly into the creature's eyes, and grasped the other's hand. "What's in it for me?" he asked coldly, throwing the creature's hand to the ground.

The creature bared its teeth, its ears pointed skyward, fur rippling along its neck. "What?" it growled.

"You heard me," Bola said, matching the other's gaze. "I am not taking that squabbling droid anywhere for nothing."

The creature's blown temper, combined with its injuries, must have been too much for its body to take. Unconsciousness doused the fire in its eyes, and Bola watched as the creature's body went limp.

Ab'Lon could feel the twin suns beating down on his aching body. A rush of hot desert air slammed into his face as his head rolled to the side. Most of his body had gone numb, and the parts he could feel rippled in waves of pain. A sense of movement, the quiet whine of an engine, and the arid desert wind slapping him in the face were more than enough clues to relay the obvious. He wondered where he was going. A thousand destinations coursed through his mind, not the most unpleasant of which was an Imperial holding cell.

The vehicle that carried him came to an abrupt stop and he could feel movement beside him. The horrible stench assaulting his nose was nearly unbearable. He could smell dead and decaying carcasses and biological waste, among other atrocities he couldn't begin to define. It was nearly enough to awaken his unconscious body, but not quite.

"Well, here's your final stop en route to the Alliance," the vaguely familiar voice rang through Ab'Lon's mind.





Something was tugging at or lifting his body, he wasn't sure which. He tried to scream, to explain the importance of his mission, anything, but his battered body refused to respond.

"Just thought you'd like to know," the voice began again, "I'm gonna find out how much of a reward is being offered for the information in this droid. I'd be willing to bet a sabacc pot that the Empire will pay better." Ab'Lon desperately tried to match a face to the voice, but recognition seemed just beyond his grasp. There was a short pause in which he could feel his body being moved around, yet he was powerless to stop it. "Well, be seeing you," the strangely familiar voice rang out as his body was released.

He fell for what seemed an eternity. All the while he wondered how all his carefully laid plans had put him into this position. He was supposed to be a savior for the Alliance -- now no one would know of his sacrifices. Someone else had the fruits of his labor and there was nothing all his years of planning could do to alter that -- no contingency that might save him.

Just as he convinced himself that he had been flung into the void, he hit the unforgiving sand, pushing out whatever air remained in his lungs. He could feel himself rolling over, as if he were tumbling downhill, and again he was powerless to stop it.

Something wrapped about his waist, stopping his descent. Needlelike projections pierced his skin through the tattered rags that served as clothing. All the pain that had plagued his body was suddenly gone. His entire body went numb and he could slowly feel his consciousness slipping away. The quiet whine of a vehicle speeding away was the last thing Tereb Ab'Lon heard before unconsciousness claimed him for the last time.

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The lone figure stood in the shadows of the docking bay, the tips of his cranial tentacles bouncing erratically. His boss had only entered the freighter five minutes ago. Just speaking to Rebel operatives was considered treason, let alone making a deal to sell information to them. And of course, Bola just went off to make the deal, leaving Tavri to watch for any Imperial activity or, more likely, spies.

Tavri's gaze left the ship and wandered about the old, stone docking bay. Burn marks littered the walls and, in several places, large chunks of stone were missing. Probably the result of blaster fire, Tavri thought. The machinery was dirty from hundreds of years of overuse, no one bothering to tinker with or clean anything that was still functional.

He gazed up into the Tatooine sky -- even from this cruddy old docking bay it was incredible. The suns set one at a time, making for lasting and beautiful sunsets like no other world could offer. It's a shame that the rest of this dustball isn't as fascinating, Tavri thought to himself, returning his gaze to the ship.

Something glittered in the waning sunlight over top of the freighter. Tavri stared a little harder, then quickly glanced around at the old machinery. None of it showed the slightest reflection.

He drew his heavy blaster pistol and whispered into the comlink clipped to his collar. "We may have trouble, be ready to get out of here." Almost as if on cue, the low hum of the freighter's engines warming up filled the docking bay.

Tavri, staying in the shadows, moved around to the opposite side of the freighter. The sounds of scuffling and something clattering on the floor, followed by a shush, rang in his ears. Whoever they were, they weren't very good at being inconspicuous. That could be good, and bad. Tavri slipped into an opening beneath the noise and started up the stairs.

He paused about midway, listening intently to the quick grunts that sounded an awful lot like... giggling. After pausing two more times, he finally arrived at the top of the stairs and carefully peered into the small controller room.

Two Ossans sat in the middle of the room. They seemed to be playing some kind of game. Tavri watched as they flung small



polished, circular rocks toward a short series of small triangular rocks that made up some type of obstacle course. Each face of the triangular rock that was hit glowed slightly. The point of the game seemed to be to hit as many faces with one fling of the rock as possible. The Ossans giggled with each fling of the rocks -- Tavri couldn't help a slight smile.

A new voice mewed in, startling him. He gazed over one Ossan's shoulder to see a Jenet sitting at a small metal gadget, which he immediately recognized as an Imperial listening device. Silently, he cursed himself for getting caught up with the game.

"I hired you two to watch my back, not play games," the creature hissed. Tavri didn't know much about Jenets. But he did know they had perfect memories and an incredibly advanced sense of hearing. "Now get off your butts and guard that stairwell," he said, obviously upset. Tavri couldn't blame him -- Ossans are very childlike. If not for that, their immense strength would make for great protection.

The Ossans grumbled as they put their game away. Tavri switched his blaster over to stun and, as the Ossans began to stand up, hit them each with a blast. The bright blue aura of the stun blasts got the Jenet's attention. Tavri switched the blaster back and moved toward the frightened creature.

"For a species known for their perfect memory, you sure seem to be stumbling for words," Tavri interrupted. "Now tell me, who hired you?"

"What are you doing here," Tavri asked, although the question was rhetorical.

"I, uh, was just ...," the creature started.

The creature went for its weapon, but Tavri's blast hit it square in the chest. The smell of charred fur assaulted his nose as he grabbed the equipment and started for the stairs. He stopped just long enough to grab the small sack the Ossans had put their game into and began to descend the stairs.

He smiled to himself as he switched on the comlink and gave Bola a run-down of the events.

"Good job," Bola's voice blistered through the comlink. "Everything went perfectly. In two days we're going to be 50,000 credits richer." Tavri smiled broadly at the thought of his cut and started for Bola's place to celebrate.